

# **'THE ON-GOING IMPACTS OF RACIST POLICIES OF THE PAST'**

Florence Onus

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**This international conference is for all who care passionately about improving women's position in the world, who demand justice and full human rights for women everywhere and who believe that a feminist analysis is essential to defining a fairer globalised world.**

## **‘THE ON-GOING IMPACTS OF RACIST POLICIES OF THE PAST’**

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### **Introduction**

My name is Florence Onus and I am a descendant of one of the traditional custodians of this territory on which we meet, the Bindjal people. On behalf of my Elders, I extend a warm welcome to you, as well as acknowledge the Wulgurukaba people of this country.

Throughout our history Australians have had to overcome great obstacles to become the great nation it is today. A large part of this history is until recently, the untold history of Indigenous Australians, who were the custodians of the land for more than 40,000 years prior to British settlement.

So I take this opportunity to share with you this history. Today I will focus on the Racist Policies of the past ie policies of Protection and Assimilation, that saw the forcible removal of Aboriginal families from land, culture and each other. We will look at the application of these policies and the on-going impacts on the individual, family and community.

This history is commonly known as the ‘Stolen Generation’. ‘The Stolen Generation – Bringing them Home Report was a result of an Inquiry by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

These past policies are regarded as racist, because they were based on ‘race’ alone ie. the Aboriginal race.

**The Hook: Verbal – consider the following real life scenario.**

This story is about a child being forcibly removed from its mother. The child is 5 years old and has 2 siblings aged 4 and 6 who are also a part of this scenario.

When I share this story with you, I want you to think about your own family. If you have children I want you to think about your own situation as a parent and your child and place yourself in this picture as the mother of the child. I also want you to think about all the emotions of the mother and the children. I want you to draw from your own emotions as you put yourself in this picture.

**This story is similar to many stories that have been echoed by Aboriginal throughout Australia.**

Today, totally unexpected, three government agents arrive at your house.

Unsuspecting, your mother answers the door and is told that they are going to remove you and your siblings immediately from her care by order of the government. You have no time to think about this, and within a blink of an eye your first reaction is to cling to your mother who immediately clings to you and your siblings.

**Think about the emotions that would be overflowing in this family, think about the mother and think about the child.**

The scene changes from a peaceful afternoon to something close to that of a football scrum – and you're the ball.

Within a few seconds you are wrenched screaming from your distressed Mother – still kicking as you are thrown into a getaway car similar to that of a kidnap scene in a movie you watched last week.

As you are driven away, you look through the rear windscreen to catch a last glimpse of your mother.

Unbeknown to her and you, that will be the last image you see of her for a long time.....she slumps to the ground in defeat, tears streaming from her eyes as she looks towards you fading into the distance.....

**In this next scene – think about the emotions of the mother and child**

This is the same mother same child.....17 years on you've just celebrated your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and you're looking forward to putting the past well behind you and facing the challenges that lie ahead. The next morning you are woken to a knock on the door, a relative of yours has come to tell you that.....your mother has just been rushed to the hospital.....because she has just tried to commit suicide.

You rush to the hospital, and are met by other members of you family.....everyone's emotions are running high and you demand to see your mother immediately. Eventually you and your siblings are reunited with your Mother. You tell yourself – that this another nightmare and your going to wake up soon. You've come through the worst, and tomorrow will be a new day!

This mother you've grown to know and admire within the short period of your return as family, has definitely tasted the highs and lows of life but always managed to rise above it all.....she is strong! And no one can break her Spirit!

**As you approach your mum, you look at her and her physical features are unchanged.....its only when you look into her eyes that you are hit with the realisation that.....she isn't there anymore.....the final separation of Mother to the child is complete.....The door of her mind is slammed shut!.....and the key has been thrown away!**

**This mother is my mother and this child is me.**

### **Stimulus**

The 2 policies we will look at today are both based on 'race'.  
**(OHP – 2 policies)**

They are:

- The Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865
- The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 Qld

**Today I will present a case study of 4 generations of women from one family – my family, who was removed from land and each other through the application of these policies.**

**The case study is my own story, my mother's story, my Grandmothers story and my Great Grandmothers story!**

### **Family History**

**(OHP – Photographs of 4 generations of women taken from archives, photographs are recorded like mug shots for Policing)**

I would like to show you some photographs of the women in my family. As you can see they are similar photographs to that of a criminal for police records. My family as well as all Aborigines was photographed in the same manner by the authorities of that time.

These are the only photos that I have of my ancestors.

**1900s** - Great Grandmother, Alice Maytown was removed from her traditional land and family - the Kukuyalanji Tribe of Cape York and sent to Central Qld.

**1920s** – Great Grandmother and my Great Grandfather who was a Kairi man and family were removed from their land to a fringe camp near the township of Springsure.

### **Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897**

**1930s** – Under the above Act, the Aboriginal Reserves were established throughout Qld and the remnant of the Aboriginal race were forcibly removed from their land and placed within the confines of the Reserve Boundaries. These reserves were no less than prisons and concentration camps as described by my ancestors; Palm Island was a penal settlement for Aborigines.

It was during this period that my Great grandmother, my grandmother and my mother who was a child at the time was rounded up and forced to live within the confines of Woorabinda Aboriginal Reserve in Central Qld.

Once inside, every aspect of their lives were regulated and controlled by the Protector or the Superintendent.

Families were fed with rations of flour, sugar, tea and the leftover meat scraps. Basic decisions of where they could walk, or who they could talk to or marry was the onus of the Protector. (OHP)

The establishment of the Reserves was the final measure needed to ensure absolute control of the Aboriginal population.

The strategies were drawn to ensure the breakdown of Aboriginal society and the disintegration of the cultural practices, in particular - the language. Every Aboriginal person belonged to a language group therefore it was inevitable that the language would be lost and this was also a strategy to ensure communications between Aboriginal people were broken. Language names were then replaced by English names, there's no record of my mother's language name, but her English name was 'Violet Fogarty'. So these Reserves were similar to the conditions of the concentration camps that we are all very familiar with in the history of the Jewish people.

### **The Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865**

**1940s** - My mother 'Violet' alongside all children was then removed from her mother and placed in the confines of what was called the 'Dormitory'. There she was to be isolated from her mother and grandmother to be raised by the dormitory staff. This separation was to ensure that all cultural practices and languages were to be destroyed and the children had to foster a new culture and new language, as with the history of the colonisation process throughout the world.

**1950s** - My mother finally left the reserve through what they called an 'Exemption Ticket' that permitted her to leave the confines of Woorabinda and live in white society. The 'Exemption Ticket' meant that she had to deny her Aboriginality and live like a white person. This caused a lot of confusion and conflict for our people as many of them took on other identities because of the stigma attached to being an 'Aboriginal'.

My mother moved to the nearest town of Rockhampton to start a new life with her two eldest children. Not long after, they were both removed from her care and fostered by a Catholic Nun who raised them in a Home for Retired Nuns, there they were to be educated and taught domestic duties.

**1960s** - Finally she moved to Townsville far from the confines of reserve life and the authorities and began to raise my two siblings and myself...and in

**1965** myself and my two siblings were forcibly removed from her and placed in an orphanage to be raised my white foster mother till my adolescent years.....

My mother experienced removal as a child from her mother and then as a mother having her child removed...

The removal of my mother from her mother, as well as my own removal from my mother along with my siblings - was due to the above policy of 'The Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865 which has since been repealed. This policy established and regulated industrial and reformatory schools for children under 15 who were '**neglected**' or convicted of an offence. Missions were registered as industrial and reformatory schools.

According to the Act, the definition of a '**neglected child**' - includes '**any child born of an aboriginal or half-caste mother**'. So any constable or authority could arrest without a warrant any child he or she considered to be neglected. It was this policy that removed 60,000 aboriginal children from their families to be raised by white foster parents as part of the assimilation process that became commonly known '**Stolen Generation**'.

The Outcomes of Policies of Protection and Assimilation have had a devastating affect on Indigenous Australians.

(OHP)

- Loss of land
- Loss of culture
- Loss of Identity
- Life expectancy of Aboriginal people are 20 years less for women and 30 years for men
- Increased health problems – mental and physical
- Chronic Alcoholism & substance abuse
- High infant mortality rate
- High suicide rate particularly among young men
- Highest level of un-employment
- Highest level of incarceration of indigenous men per capita
- Low socio economic base
- Low self esteem & self worth

The brainwashing of a new culture and ways of coping that was to assist Aboriginal people in the Reserve, Mission and Orphanage environment, have not equipped them in a situation where they are to make decisions, negotiate and manage a series of settlements in life, including political settlements within a dominant society.

The outcomes of such controls have made Aboriginal families dysfunctional; rather in a way a former inmate of an institution may find his or her coping mechanisms are of no use in the outside world.

My Great Grandmother, my grandmother, my mother and my own story, are four generations that have suffered from loss of land, culture, family and love. The physical, emotional and sexual abuse is a part of our history.

Members of my family and many Aboriginal people still carry the hurt, loss & pain of generations, many have only began their healing journey.

I hope that this session has given you an awareness of the devastating impacts of past racist policies to which Indigenous Australians are still suffering from today. Also the underlying issues that have created enormous social problems affecting Indigenous Australians. Our history, which is Australia's history, must be told so that you can help us address these issues today.

Thank you.